English Language Teaching; Vol. 7, No. 1; 2014
ISSN 1916-4742 E-ISSN 1916-4750
Published by Canadian Center of Science and Education

LETs and NETs: Exploring How Teachers from Diverse Cultural Backgrounds Impact Student Motivation and Preferences

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Received: June 25, 2013 Accepted: July 10, 2013 Online Published: December 5, 2013

doi:10.5539/elt.v7n1p57 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v7n1p57

Abstract

This paper, an exploratory case study, examines how students' preferences and motivation to learn English are influenced by their perceptions of teaching practices – both of native English teachers and local English teachers. To better understand the context of this research question, this study adopts a method of triangulation in collecting data: classroom observation, student interviews and teacher interviews. For intrinsic motivation, results reveal that Chinese students prefer a native-English-speaking teacher's approach to communication language teaching. However, for extrinsic motivations, students preferred the curriculum-oriented approach of local teachers due to the relevance to the ultimately- important English examinations.

Keywords: local English teacher, native English teachers, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation

1. Introduction

The Hong Kong Native English Speaking Teacher Scheme (NETS) was introduced in 1986 to recruit overseas native English speaking teachers to teach English in Hong Kong. The scheme had aroused controversy (Chan, 1998; Boyle, 1997) and there is still a growing body of literature criticising the effectiveness of the NET scheme – e.g. Cook (1999) criticized the unrealistic expectations on L2 learners to take the native language speaker model as their goal because it is simply unattainable – yet the scheme can still show positive influence on student language acquisition. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) pointed out that NETs are highly appreciated by Chinese students because NETs are considered a linguistic model that can provide authentic English examples for the students (Beardsmore, 1993; Genesee, 1987). The verbal interaction opportunities that NETs provide are indeed valued by Chinese students. Tsui (1985) and Tsang (1994) compared the input and interaction patterns between NETs and LETs with their Hong Kong English students and found LETs had greater teaching effectiveness, while the language learning environment created by the NETs were more conducive to learning authentic English.

While there is a growing body of literature and research on student perceptions and attitudes toward NETs in Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong – and in particular their value as language models (Law, 1999; Lai, 1999; Storey, Luk, Gray, Wang-Kho & Berry, 2001; Carless, 2006; Luk & Lin, 2007) – there is limited research or study focusing on how the different student perceptions of NETs and LETs classroom practices relate to student learning motivation and preferences.

The most relevant studies are probably those by Noels, Clement and Pelltier (1999) and Garcia-Ros, Perez and Talaya (2008). Noels, Clement & Pelltier found that perceptions of teacher communication styles were related to intrinsic motivation, while Garcia-Ros, Perez & Talaya found that there was a significant relationship between preference for instructional methods, learning style and motivational orientation. Preferences for unidirectional and autonomous methods are related to an internal attribution for academic success, while preferences for multidirectional methods are related to high expectations of self-efficacy for learning. However, both studies were conducted in a context where teachers and students were of the same cultural background, whereas this study aims to understand how teachers that differ in cultural backgrounds affect student learning preferences and motivations.

2. Purpose of Study

With a NET and a LET teaching the same class of primary students on different days, the main purpose of this present study is to investigate the different ways in which teachers of different cultural backgrounds impact student learning motivation and preferences.

3. Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1) How do student perceptions of a NET and a LET affect student English learning motivation and preferences?

2) How do the different teaching practices adopted by a NET and a LET affect student English learning motivation and preferences?

4. Methodology

To get the 'inside story' on how students perceive NETs and LETs, the case study method has been chosen. The main means of data collection are through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, supported by detailed chronological observations notes.

4.1 Sampling

4.1.1 The School

The researcher approached the principals of several government-subsidised primary schools that appeared to be representative of how the NET scheme had been implemented in Hong Kong – and who were also apparently willing to accept a researcher and participate in the study. However, only one principal responded, with two teachers from her school volunteering to provide the researcher with access to their classrooms and interview time.

4.1.2 The Teachers

The local teacher, Ms. Sarah (pseudonym), was the Head of the English Department. The other teacher, Ms. Emily (pseudonym), was the NET. Both had received the required teacher training. Sarah (the LET) had approximately 10 years of teaching experience, and Emily (the NET) had approximately 20 years.

The LET taught English to 3 classes of primary students in year 2 and year 4, daily, while the NET taught the same classes an oral language lesson based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), once per week. This loading had been determined by the Principal and was based on the NET scheme requirement of providing authentic language environments in which to learn English. The two teachers planned together so that the oral language content that the LET sought to develop in her students (among other skills) could be enhanced and expanded upon amongst their shared students.

4.1.3 The Students

The researcher interviewed three students from each of the six aforementioned classes. Students, from a cross-section of ability groups and English language backgrounds, were selected on the basis of their confidence in expressing informal aspects of their lives (in Cantonese) by the participant teacher, as she is familiar with her students' English proficiency.

4.2 Data Collection

4.2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews with Teachers

Both teachers were tracked over the same two school days, several weeks apart, during morning English language sessions with the year 2 and 4 classes they shared. The researcher conducted one round of semi-structured interviews with the students and two rounds of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the teachers, at one point in each week. All interviews were held immediately after English language classes. The purpose of the first-round, in-depth interviews with the teachers was to gain insights into their culturally-and-socially-determined teaching and learning beliefs, then through the second round gain insights into their attitudes and beliefs about learning and teaching English in a Second Language context.

4.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews with Students

The purpose of the student interviews was to elicit their perceptions and responses to the culturally-different teaching approaches and styles. To avoid miscommunication, interviews with students were conducted in their first language, Cantonese.

4.2.3 Lesson Observations and Field Notes

The researcher used video lesson recordings to gauge how teachers and students were interacting with each other and to understand how the various methodologies and activities used had an impact on student engagement. Six lessons, each of 45 minutes, were observed for the LET and for the NET. Detailed field notes gave chronological descriptions of teacher and student interactions and behaviours during lessons. Evaluative comments and issues for clarification were noted, to be followed up in the interviews.

4.3 Data Analysis

4.3.1 General Approach

This study adapted a form of the "phenomenological" approach to analysing interview data – proposed by Hycner (1985) – because of its clear process of reducing and analyzing interview data. The 14 steps were streamlined as follows:

1) Transcription

2) Phenomenological reduction – a summary of the essential meaning of a communication

3) Delineating units of general meaning relevant to the research question and eliminating redundancies – effectively eliciting only what is important to the research question

4) Identifying both general and unique themes for all the interviews – highlighting summaries from Step 3 (ibid)

Essentially, steps 1-3 focus on individual interviews and step 4 collates multiple interviews.

4.3.2 Semi-Structured Interview Topics

The interview questions were structured in order to elicit how students responded to English classes conducted by the NET and the LET. The interviews were conducted in Cantonese, the language with which students felt most comfortable. The interview questions with the students included:

1) Do you like your English teachers (the LET and the NET) teaching you? Why?

2) Are you scared to answer her (both the LET and NET) questions? Why?

3) Do you answer questions in Cantonese? Why?

4) Do you speak to your English teachers in Cantonese? When? Why?

5) From whom do you prefer to learn English: The NET or the LET? Why?

Similarly, semi-structured interview questions were used with the LET and NET to determine how their beliefs have influenced their practices in support of student perception of their teaching. Among other things, the interview questions focused on:

1) Beliefs about effective English language teaching and learning

2) How they support and encourage students to participate

3) Impact of prior experiences and teaching requirements on what and how they teach

5. Results

5.1 How Do Student Perceptions of Their NET and LET Affect Their Motivation and Preferences in Learning English?

Interestingly, all students found the NET to be a tolerant teacher, while the LET was considered a strict and controlling teacher. In their interviews, students expressed a preference for teacher style: they enjoyed the relaxed learning environment of the NET. The following is a representative excerpt:

S1: Even though Ms Emily is a NET and only speaks English, she is very tolerant and she plays lots of games and tells stories in class, and we can have fun in groups.

R: Does it mean Ms Sarah has a distant relationship with you?

S1: Well, not a very distant relationship with her! She will also play with us, but she is too strict, while we are not behaving well in class but Ms Emily doesn't mind us being noisy. (SI2, 2:15)

According to the researcher's notes, the LET adopted a classroom management strategy to be understood between her and the students.

"Of the several times I had observed the LET class, she would clap her hands three times and keep silent when she found the class was noisy. The class would then clap their hands three times and went "Shhh……". This was a strategy to keep the class in order. This strategy could be done up to 5 times per lesson by the LET…but the NET had never done that to the class. Students were free to express or say anything to their peers in her lesson. Peer interaction was initiated by the students, not the NET." (FN, 20080925)

With the more tolerant teacher style and relaxed environment, it was found that the students were more active in the NET class. Students were constantly trying out new language hypotheses in the NET class. In the non-threatening environment, students were given the maximum learning opportunities to try their language

skills and fill in each other's information gaps. Their willingness to take risks was observed to be higher in the NET class than in the LET class. Students used English for communication more often in the NET class, where they would leave their seats and chat in either English or their L1 about what their classmates had done with the tasks given by the NET – this never happened in the LET class, where students were more conscious of classroom discipline and complying with teacher instructions. The researcher observed that the types of questions asked among the students in a group setting would be to ensure they were meeting the LET's expectation for the given tasks, such as, "Is this correct?" (係咪咁呀?), "How do you do it?" (你點做呀?), spoken in Cantonese. There was rarely any English communication among students in the LET class. Teacher style had an impact on student learning preference and motivation to communicate in English.

5.2 How Do the Different Teaching Practices Adopted by NET and LET Affect Student Motivation and Preferences in Learning English?

Although students preferred a more tolerant teacher in general, they preferred the teaching practices adopted by the LET. The results found in RQ2 reflected another side of the coin to that seen in 6.1.

Some students revealed that they enjoyed the NET's approach of teaching English through play – those students were usually students with high ability. Intrinsic motivation was identified. A representative student interview excerpt proved this point.

R: Who is your favorite teacher, in your opinion?

S: Ms Emily.

R: Why?

S: Because she plays games with us, which are new to us and interesting.

R: So you like games? Can you learn anything?

S: We'll play and learn at the same time. (SI3, 4:05)

Ms Emily believed that putting fun into learning had the potential to motivate students and achieve positive student learning outcomes with respect to the goals laid out in the Curriculum Guideline (2004). The approach of "learn through play" was put forth by Piaget (1954). His studies proved that learners learn best by discovering and constructing their own knowledge through hands-on learning experiences. This kind of meaningful task is a vital catalyst to an ESL learner's language development and enhancing motivation to learn English. In relation to this, Ms Emily said:

"…I always plan to give the students some input that is interesting, and hopefully they will be interested in talking about this. I hope this encourages them to say something and talk in class, so I try to include the teaching point in the story, game or whatever I use to make the meaning and focus comprehensible. I think this will provide them with a reason to follow and as they follow and become involved in the activity they will use English…." (TI2, 6:08)

In the observed lesson, she used a picture of a musical band to introduce the topic (E1, 1:30) and different musical instruments (E1, 5:45) to introduce the topic of 'pop star'. Students then played music and sang together to learn the content of a song, then read a story.

In other lessons, Ms Emily often used a variety of props and objects to introduce a text, which the students liked. In one particular lesson she used a printed cartoon version of "Shrek" to introduce a new story (E2, 2:47-5:25) in order to motivate her students to listen and demonstrate how meaning is made.

T: Nice to see you all again, 4A. I'll read you a story today. Before I read it, I want to remind you of a story you all know. What story…you know it. What story? (showed a picture of one of the characters)

Ss: Shrek.

T: Right, the story is about Shrek. Can you tell me who is in the story?

S: Fiona

T: That's right, let's now find Fiona….

Collected data proved that the non-threatening environment created by the NET facilitated English learning which was largely initiated by the students themselves, and students became self-motivated. This can be explained by Clément's (1980) linguistic confidence motivation theory. With less control over student behaviour in the class, students would have more opportunities to practice using the target language, and high levels of anxiety would not occur. Motivation to learn English would hence be better facilitated.

Although students enjoyed the NET's communicative teaching methods and perceived the LET as more controlling, an interesting interwoven result appeared during the process of data analysis. Although students saw the LET as an authority figure, she was also seen as the key person who transmitted knowledge to them – and their major role as students was to receive, absorb, and digest the knowledge transmitted by the teacher (Scollon & Scollon, 1995; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Holliday, 1997). They considered the curriculum-oriented approach from the LET to be "proper learning", while the NET's lesson was only "for fun". They considered the textbook and more formal, teacher-led approach the most important way to acquire language.

One student said:

"…I like Ms Emily's class because it is fun. We play games and we relax in class. The games are new to us and interesting. But it's not studying and reading from our textbook. I do not feel happier in Ms Emily's class because I think traditional study is good. Her lessons are not the regular syllabus…" (SI1, 7:22)

Such a value placed on what is considered to be the best model of English and a preference for one skill among many that make up a language means that students feel that they have not learned much of meaningful importance from their NET, in that the teaching does not follow the textbook or grammar. Several students alluded to what they consider to be valued learning activities. They said:

"…I think Ms Emily is soft because her lessons are not the regular syllabus. And we play games. Ms Sarah teaches us the textbook stuff and we don't have games very often…" (SI4, 5:19)

Another female student added that,

"…I feel better with Ms Sarah because we study and read from the textbook. She uses the textbook more. This is traditional study and I think it is good…" (SI3, 4:08)

One NET lesson was observed to be focused on using communicative tasks – clearly the students perceived this activity as a "game" and fun (E2 43:05).

T: It's easy to play, you are right! I can put them all up. But you can think of more terms, too! You can use this. I'll throw the ball to a friend! Then you say, I am or I am not good at blar blar blar…

T: Then... you say... if you say the same one, you are out! In this game, you should say a new question.

S: Okay!

T: And remember, throw gently. Are you ready?

Ss: Yes!

T: Are you ready?

Ss: Yes!

T: Okay, let's play! Are you good at riding a bicycle?

S: Yes, I am good at bicycle.

T: Riding a bicycle… any question?

S: Are you good at singing?

S: Yes, I am good at singing.

S: 抛比我! [Translated: Throw it to me!]

T: Question?

S: Are you good at drawing a picture?

S: Yes, I am good at drawing picture.

S: Are you good at…?

S: Reading a book!

This preference for a traditional teaching style is in direct contrast with western teaching and learning approaches meant to develop learner independence and classroom participation (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). As Evans (1997) commented, LETs treat English as an academic subject and direct their efforts towards drilling students in textbook-based language patterns for the sake of passing an examination. Students in Hong Kong also expect their English language classes to have a strong focus on grammar. One girl mentioned:

"…I think grammar is very important and it must be done correctly in class. Ms Sarah teaches us good grammar

and I like her to teach us…We need to learn grammar because the examinations are all about grammar..." (SI6, 3:35)

Grammar and vocabulary are highly valued by students, especially in relation to examinations, while learning meaningful casual speech was only supplementary to what were learnt from the LET. A student spoke about the value she had placed on the particular teaching style she was comfortable with, which proved that student extrinsic motivation was high:

"…Our goal in the classroom is to study, since we are not here for fun, even if it may be easier to memorise the information through games. If we play games all the time, we may only memorise small amounts of words, and if we keep playing games, it will be easy to forget everything. I believe the only way to learn and achieve good academic results is to pay attention while studying…" (SI5, 3:18)

According to Gardner and Lambert (1959), extrinsic motivation means that students see instrumental value as the driver for learning the target language. From the excerpt above, students saw that good academic results were best achieved through studying hard. When asked to compare the two teaching styles, students preferred the traditional teacher-led methods more than CLT, and the importance of extrinsic motivation surfaced.

Another interesting result that surfaced during this study was the role L1 played in Ss' learning preferences. All students interviewed revealed the importance of being able to use L1 to supplement the English teacher's lessons as a major factor in their English learning preferences. All students preferred the LET's teaching because of the LET's ability to speak Cantonese. All students said they preferred LET because they could ask the teacher questions if they did not know how to answer a question in English. A student of low ability mentioned this in an interview:

R: If you have a choice, who would you prefer teaching you?

S: Local teacher

R: Why?

S: Because if I don't understand some English words, I could ask her.

R: What about the NET, you could ask her, too?

S: I could ask her too, but my English is not very good, so it's more difficult to communicate with her. Even she explains to me, I still don't understand.

S: NET teacher cannot explain, and we don't understand the English, the NET doesn't know that we don't understand. Ms Sarah's class, if I know the answer, I will raise my hand and ask Ms Sarah if I can answer it in Cantonese. If I do not know how to answer I will ask, Ms Sarah. "Can I speak in Cantonese?" (SI4, 7:02)

In the researcher's field notes, it also stated, *"…the NET was not aware that the students did not understand her questions. Neither did students express their doubts to their teacher. The questions students had remained unresolved."* (FN20081015)

Through this data, the ability of students to speak their L1 was seen as an important component affecting their learning preference. The importance of students being able to comprehend what the teacher said seemed crucial to their understanding, even when they expressed their interests in the CLT approach. All interviewed students alluded to a sense of frustration because they had expected a certain level of learning support in their L1. Student reaction to a teacher's ability to speak their L1 was highly related to their extrinsic motivation.

6. Discussions

This study found that student motivation was highly complex in relation to teachers of different cultural backgrounds. Student learning motivation and preferences varied and changed in different contexts and situations. Further study in this area is needed. Students generally preferred the way NET teachers tend to be open-minded and tolerant, and were thus able to explore language use in the non-threatening learning environment provided by the NET. A study conducted by Boyle (1987) found positive and significant improvements in both oral and aural skills if students were taught by NETs. As Tang & Johnson (1993) reported, English was no longer simply a subject, but rather a means of communication among students who were taught by the NET. Also, the NET fulfilled a duty to engage students in both formal and informal interactions inside and outside classrooms (Lai, 1999).

However, strong extrinsic motivation exhibited by students was believed to be highly related to the curriculum-oriented approach adopted by the LET. Students saw examination and the relevant language knowledge as the major purpose of learning English, so the students preferred the LET's systematic approach of

transmitting language knowledge. Johnson (1993) also confirmed this conclusion in his study, indicating that secondary school students had reservations about NETs' ability to prepare them for the public examination, and thus a NET's teaching was generally considered unimportant. However, it is important to note that although students valued a LET's focus on curriculum and examination, it is fair to state that the quantity of English proficiency students achieve with a NET is difficult to measure. That is, combining both CLT and curriculum-based approaches may be the most appropriate way to activate student motivation to learn English while still sustaining their interest. This is because CLT inevitably must be applied locally because students fit in to their own local culture, ideology, values and norms, which differ substantially from those of the NET.

CLT taught by the NET is proven to be an approach students enjoy, in that the environment had low levels of anxiety and maximum opportunities to practice language usage. However, students only considered CLT a "supplementary class" and not "real teaching and learning". Students did not seem to be ready to accept a teaching approach beyond their cultural framework – a result echoed in Young & Wong's study (2009). Similar views were expressed by Boyle (1997), in that even the average native speakers have an advantage over the LET's language ability, but LETs are favoured by students because of their cultural affinity and sensitivity. Because students were aware of the importance of examinations, extrinsic motivation was found to be strong when compared with the intrinsic motivation exhibited in the CLT approach. There are several possible reasons behind this complicated state of mind:

1) Extrinsic motivation has been strong in Hong Kong in respect of parents, teachers, schools and culture (Biggs, 1995; Bond, 1991);

2) Teachers might not have a deep understanding of the effectiveness or the approach of CLT, nor how to implement it;

3) Promotion to a desirable secondary schools in Hong Kong was primarily examination-based;

4) Students could only be aware of tangible and conscious learning. Use of worksheets, dictation and learning assessments are objective proof of learning;

5) Language knowledge was considered more important than language use; and

6) CLT was beyond the Chinese cultural framework (Young & Wong, 2009).

This study indicates that different cultural approaches will affect patterns of motivation to learn English. Similar findings were also reported by Shepherd & Gilbert (1991), Phillipson (1992), Widdowson (1994), Holliday (1994) and Zhang (1995). However, a new question arises: if students are not ready to accept an approach which is beyond their cultural framework, are they limiting their own engagement in learning? For some students, this seems to be the case, due to their cultural perceptions (Young & Wong, 2009).

The medium of instruction (MOI) also played a significant role in affecting student learning motivation. Whether the issue of teachers supplementing their lessons with the students' L1 is crucial or not, students saw "understanding" what the teachers said as more important than "learning through play" or "having a relaxed learning environment". They felt that the key role of a teacher was to transmit knowledge to them, therefore being able to understand them was crucial to learning. The use of L1 very often was the quickest way to help those who did not understand the teacher's meaning. If MOI is an important issue to students, it would seem necessary to revisit the policy of MOI in English classes – even as Kirkpatrick (2009) suggested, the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction. The current policy applies only to secondary schools, not primary schools. So the question remains: should the MOI policy be consistently applied to primary schools if a student wishes to use L1 to supplement teaching, when necessary, in primary schools?

Based on this study, several characteristics can be summarized as the motivating factors which facilitate language learning:

1) Provide a non-threatening language learning environment;

2) Focus on curriculum;

3) Adopt a curriculum-oriented teaching approach, but supplement with some CLT approach;

4) Adopt different teaching approaches when student language developmental direction is observed;

5) Be sensitive to students' needs; and

6) Be flexible in the use of medium of instruction.

7. Conclusion

This study explored the relationship between motivation and gender for Chinese EFL students. There were two limitations with respect to the analysis and data collection that may affect the accuracy of the results. First of all, the participants of this study were drawn from the same school in Hong Kong. This study could have drawn participants from at least one school in each Hong Kong district to increase the validity of the findings. Also, the study would have benefited from additional quantitative information on attitudes and behavioral aspects obtained through questionnaires. Though there are limitations in this study, lights can be shed on helping schools to understand the fundamental gender differences between male and female students in terms of motivation and learning needs with the results of this study.

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